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Question1:

Question2:

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Question5: The following comments are being submitted to address the Resource Conservation and Development Program as part of the 2007 Farm Bill.

Overall Purpose

The overall purpose of the Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program is to assist state and local units of government, nonprofits, and Indian Tribes plan and carry out a program of resource conservation and development. RC&D Councils help build capacity at the local level to address natural resource issues. Local people can apply for USDA designation as an RC&D Area in order to receive technical assistance that is used to define local needs and help build capacity to meet those needs. That program purpose has served local communities well for the last 40 years. It has allowed local people to be actively involved in the development of an RC&D Area and it ensures that public input and oversight of the program are achieved. It is strongly recommended that the 2007 Farm Bill language reaffirm this capacity building purpose and keep the local citizens in control of the process.

Strategic Planning

The RC&D program is best characterized by planning. Over the years an Area Wide planning process has been perfected that helps local citizens identify the needs and priorities of local issues and develop sound solutions to meet those needs. The technical assistance that is provided by the program allows local citizens to focus on the development of these Area Wide plans and the projects associated with them. Again, the strength of the program is that the strategic planning process is driven at the grass roots level and not by the Agency administering the program. Recent changes in program delivery suggest that planning and natural resource concerns and issues will be set at the national level for the program. This would cause major damage to the program as it is now run and reduce the effectiveness of a locally run planning process. It is recommended that the 2007 Farm Bill outline steps to ensure the continuation of the Area Wide planning process run at the local level by RC&D Councils and that those Councils have discretion over what resource issues and concerns will be identified and addressed in the area's strategic plan.

Program Management

Historically, the program has been managed in partnership between the

RC&D Councils and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. This partnership is built on a clearly defined purpose of the program, a strong Area Wide Planning process, and the measurement and reporting of results achieved at the local level as part of the implementation of the Area Wide Plan. These three basic components allow local Councils to customize the delivery of the RC&D program in a way that best meets local conditions and needs. This ability to adapt the program locally is unique in Federal Government as is a good example of how federal resources can be used to target needs that local citizens feel deserves the most attention. Now, management of the program and its funding is under attack from the Office of Management and Budget for not being more like the rest of federal government, a top down approach to problem solving. If used properly the program purpose, area planning process and effective results measurements are all that is needed to ensure the efficient delivery of federal resources to the local level. It is recommended that the 2007 Farm Bill allow for the continuation of the RC&D Council as the focal point of program management and direct NRCS to develop a better progress reporting system that supports that local control of the program.

Program Results

Results that are reported by Councils are currently based on a local planning process that identifies and solves local problems. The projects associated with this planning process are normally unique to an individual RC&D Area and the priorities that the local Council places on addressing issues. Proposed changes to measuring progress suggest that the USDA NRCS will now set the types of resource issues to be tracked and what progress will be reported by Councils. This is a radical departure from the locally initiated and implemented process we now have. The proposed performance goals are not reflective of what Councils normally accomplish in the course of a year and do not provide an accurate picture of all the work that is being accomplished at the local level. Program results, performance goals, and the progress reported should remain at the local level with the RC&D Council. It is recommended that the 2007 Farm Bill provide clear guidance to the USDA NRCS in developing a workable progress reporting system that will effectively capture locally defined performance goals and progress. In this way, the program will ensure that accurate and complete results will be achieved.

Question6: